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ABSTRACT

Seventeen suggestions to create an exciting innovative learning experience for undergraduate liberal arts education are listed. Suggestions concern curriculum and scheduling, requirements, work-study and professional programs, course content, and living-learning and study abroad programs. (MJM)

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CRITIQUE

A Quarterly Memorandum

The Center for the Study of Higher Education

The University of Toledo

INNOVATIONS AND TEACHING TODAY'S UNDERGRADUATES

W. Frank Hull IV*

"Well, I'm sitting through that math class, but honestly now, it's nothing that I haven't already studied in high school."

"Professor Norberg, oh yea, he's quite easy to snow. All you have to do is say the right sort of things in class and he responds right on key and gets all excited like one of Skinner's pigeons."

"Why should I bother with that class — the instructor is unbelievably dull, he's boring, and he acts as if he could care less that any of us understand the subject."

"You know, it's a real shame that we have undergraduates around here at all, they really interfere with my getting my work done."

The antipathy between the student and his college, his teachers, his elders, or whatever is a topic upon which everyone has an opinion and is also an issue that has been with us probably as long as one man has been attempting to show another how to do something. Traditionally the very process of education itself places one person, a teacher, in a position ahead of and hence superior to another person, a student. The comments of the three students and one professor above cannot be considered atypical. They are merely the points made casually by the last four individuals to "drop by" the facilities of The Center for the Study of Higher Education to ask one question or another.

But the disturbing fact about the above comments is that they represent subtle attitudes on the part of three relatively new students at college — students who remember how, when they were in high school, they had looked forward to college as the opportunity to study, learn, and be challenged. Now, once in college, their attitudes have changed to seeing college as simply another hurdle in life. Nor did the professor above always feel the way he now speaks.

In fact, this relatively young man made a conscious choice to enter teaching because he enjoyed working with young people. Now he has felt the press to "publish," wonders if the economic realities of the institution will permit his tenure, is confused over what he feels have been changes in "young people," and is annoyed at the bitter power conflicts and gossip that make up faculty politics.

Both these students and that faculty member are reacting within a confused and stereotypic concept of higher education. All are moving toward a blind acceptance of a system that need not be as it appears to be.

Education is seen, by many today, through simplistic terms as somewhere between two conflicting ideologies. On the one hand, education is a process where one person "transmits" certain entities of knowledge or skill by funneling such from the teacher to the pupil. The emphasis here becomes the content of that which is transmitted and the criterion point is how effectively it is accomplished. The teacher here is the one who knows and hopefully understands best the particular entities of knowledge or skill in question. A polar position argues that "real education," on the other hand, is a process of education that brings from within a student his "creative powers" to deal with the world in which he exists and encourages him to develop hypotheses through introspection of his experiences. Hence the emphasis is on the student and his "freedom to learn."

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The latter blatantly chooses to ignore the nature of discipline imperative to learning, while the former does not take into sufficient account the fact that each student is an individual who comes out of a peculiar environment with particular biases which affect the way in which he learns. Both underestimate the influence of the milieu and the relationship existing between the teacher and the student which in the last analysis are the crucial factors in the learning process itself.

One can always theorize as to where the blame is to be placed, with faculty or students, or who is responsible for taking the initiative to correct this situation. Today, however, it should be recognized that there are many attempts presently underway which, in the initiators' minds, do attempt to move an institution toward establishing a more vitalized and exciting learning experience for the undergraduate's liberal arts education. To consider, for example, just a few of the options open to realistic consideration at most liberal arts colleges:

1. "Consortia departments" can be established between nearby colleges permitting institutions that cannot afford a large faculty in certain disciplines to be able, nevertheless, to offer training and even a major emphasis in that particular discipline or area.

2. "Honors" programs can be established to permit a freshman to begin study advanced and tailored to his needs, abilities, and interests rather than requiring him to produce so many hours of "superior" grades in introductory-type courses.

3. Remedial courses can be established in selected high schools themselves rather than waiting until the students arrive as "disadvantaged" on campus. Such can be taught by college faculty or students advanced in a particular subject who may be considering teaching as a career. Such can also provide a ready laboratory for research on teaching and learning by faculty.

4. Calendar revisions, long discussed on campuses, today have a choice of 4-1-4, 1-4-4, 4-4-1, the 3^1_2 week per single course scheme, quarters, semesters, terms, or diverse variations thereof.

5. Time block revisions can be made whereby classes meet less frequently but for more concentrated periods of time, i.e., one evening per week, two mornings, three hours once a week, the natural sciences on Mondays and Tuesdays with the social sciences on Wednesdays through Friday mornings, or *et cetera* to meet local college needs.

6. Interdisciplinary "colloquies" are being tried on various campuses today. Faculty, given proper circumstances, can plan an integrative course that is not just a compilation of unrelated disciplinary lectures around a general theme.[1]

7. Requirements for courses can be altered:[2]

   a. the college may decide to have no requirements for any courses and place responsibility on the student to make his own decisions based on what he feels he can handle in any given period of study. As such, the college can also require faculty to state clearly the proficiencies expected within the course.

   b. the college may decide to have all requirements for individual courses removed except "the permission of the instructor."

   c. the college may decide for an "open program" with minimal requirements necessary for graduation, i.e., freshman composition (or communication skills courses like speech) and physical education may be considered to be the only subjects essential to be presented in a B.A. program.

   d. the college may decide that it is time to require that students plan, propose, and define their own programs individually. This requires much faculty counsel of students early in their careers, but can be handled much like many colleges presently handle the problem of approving interterm study projects.

8. A college has the option of either offering advanced credit for high school courses or enrolling high school students in specified courses at the college prior to formal admission but on the basis of ability. CLEP examinations are being used as indicators of college-level accomplishments with increasing frequency.[3]

9. Work-Study options are again being seriously considered as many colleges respond to student concerns to involve their education with the

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[1] Cf. John F. Noonan, "The Impact of Curricular Change on Faculty Behavior," **Liberal Education**, LVII, 3 (October, 1971), 344-358.

[2] David Ballard, "Plan for a College," **Canadian University and College** (June, 1969), 35-36, 42 and 43.

[3] Cf. **College Board Review**, 81 (Fall, 1971) for a series of articles on this point, or write The Director, Comparative Guidance and Placement Program, College Entrance Examination Board, 888 Seventh Ave., New York, N. Y. 10019.

"real world." Individual professional programs can be interspersed with work experience regardless of whether the total college uses a work-study program.

10. Students so choosing can be assigned to certain "action groups" which are involved in specific community projects and assigned credit on the basis of analytical reports. A sociology professor might be involved with such a group and teach these students a fuller understanding of sociological concepts than any series of lectures or readings could accomplish.

11. A variation of the above utilizes students' summer experiences, preapproved by a faculty member and requiring a written analytical paper much like any traditional independent study course.

12. A college-wide, class-wide, department-wide, or some other appropriate grouping can be used for a series of faculty-student retreat seminars for one or two days, with or without credit. Such can be done on a particular topic or more general issue.

13. Courses can be encouraged to utilize non-traditional classrooms in style with the subject or desires of the class to break down the formal environment. Many students today are negatively affected by the formalism of our classrooms. Some professors have discovered that merely removing a tie makes a difference in the amount of discussion in the classroom. This, however, must be tailored by an understanding of the individual professor and his students. Some professors overreact and make fools of themselves. I submit that the instructor who uses this point to smoke marijuana with students "to establish rapport" has clearly misunderstood and is making a major error of judgment as to what constitutes an effective educational environment for the classroom.

14. Faculty at at least one institution volunteer to conduct a specific investigation of a particular problem with an overload of four students who are chosen through interview and given credit. In this case, the faculty might be encouraged to do something appropriate to his own research or professional-developmental needs.

15. Eight to ten freshman students may be assigned to a volunteer faculty member who agrees to serve as "group leader and advisor" to these students irrespective of the students' present academic departmental assumptions for the first year, permitting both an informal advisee relationship and the chance to develop a seminar which would traditionally be classed for credit as "general education." Such groups could furthermore be assigned specific tasks — like working on communicative skills. Clearly this must be "volunteer" on the part of the faculty. Professors who feel ill at ease with this form of education should never be forced to participate.

16. Living-learning experiments continue to be live options at certain colleges. Sometimes this is more easily accomplished through sub-colleges or sub-programs with a college structure.[4]

17. Study abroad programs, sometimes through a regional arrangement with other institutions, often provide an additional educational option for certain students beyond that which could ever be offered at the home college. On the other hand, few colleges today come even close to utilizing adequately the educational resources already available on the campus in the presence of international students.[5]

The above, plus plenty of other proposals and suggestions,[6] all represent options within liberal arts undergraduate education that may be appropriate in any given small liberal arts college. None are particularly new and none should be considered to be very radical. The deciding factor, of course, must be the particular students and environmental milieu that exists on any single campus. Widespread generalizations are fallacious simply because not all liberal arts colleges will ever be alike in faculty interests, administrative philosophy, students, location, resources, aspirations, or needs. What we desperately need today in American undergraduate education is a greater diversity, not a greater unity. And contrary to the generally held myth, accrediting committees and graduate and professional schools are encouraging of solid attempts to make undergraduate education more

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[4] See **The Experimental Subcollege**, ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education, Report No. 12 (June, 1971); "The Pilot Project: A Residential Experiment for Undergraduates" **Memo to the Faculty**, No. 67 (Center for Research on Learning and Teaching, The University of Michigan, January, 1972).

[5] For an example of such within a formal college course see M. Frank Hall Jr. and Paul Rudy, "An Alternative in Teaching Comparative Education," **Contemporary Education**, 41(4), 2 (January, 1971), 126-127.

[6] The major sources relevant to the contemporary scene and offering practical advice would include the following: **Reforming Undergraduate Curriculum: Problems and Proposals**, ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education, Review No. 6 (March, 1971); Lewis B. Mayhew and Patrick J. Ford, **Changing the Curriculum**, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1971) especially Chapter 7, "Innovation Possibilities" and Chapter 8 "Mechanisms for Change"; Paul L. Dressel, **College and University Curriculum**, Berkeley: McCutchan Publishing Corporation, 1968; Arthur W. Chickering, **Education and Identity**, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1969; Joseph Katz and Search for Relevance, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1969.

exciting and vital rather than retaining traditionalism for traditionalism's sake. We must first, however, understand what it is we are trying to do on our particular campus before we can adequately decide how best to do it. Secondly, we must understand clearly who our particular students are and are likely to be.

Unfortunately the one issue that I have personally yet to hear discussed when the subject of undergraduate reform comes up should be the most important: What is best for our students in terms of their abilities and in terms of their likely future directions. Of course, we need to be acutely aware as to how changes will effect faculty positions, morale, space utilization, etc. But an undergraduate college of liberal arts, if it has any meaningful commitment to being an "undergraduate college," should hold seriously its dedication toward being an educational institution for the eighteen to twenty-one year old. That is a three-pronged commitment to teaching, to the college youth, and to the needs of society.

The key to the whole question of educating today's undergraduates, when all is said and done, is really quite simple. The most any teacher can give to a student is a series of biases as to how that teacher as a person approaches a discipline or a field of inquiry. Other than that, the student is merely encouraged and directed toward learning (i.e., making part of himself) certain skills and modes of operation. In other words, a sizeable part of the education process is the self-comprehension and consequent mastery by the student of particular skills and talents. It is therefore more accurate to speak in terms of what I, as a teacher, encourage my students to think about and seriously consider or practice, rather than what I "teach."

Teaching is dialogue. No matter how programmed instruction becomes — and I, for one, hope to see major headways in such "individualized" instruction — the ability of the teacher to relate *both* as a professional and as a person to that institution's students, individually and in groups, will always be a crucial factor in the process of the undergraduate liberal arts education. The key to the "innovative" process is precisely the ability and skill of the teacher, as a person, in dialogue with students. Such ability is totally uncorrelated to academic attainments, age, salary, rank, or whatever.

Clearly what we need today is a reunderstanding of the function of "teacher" in the undergraduate college, a reunderstanding that might drastically influence all of our so-called "professional" assumptions and ethics that generally govern faculty interrelations with today's students. "Innovations" short of such a reunderstanding can provide useful and exciting programs reforming higher education while illustrating the "Hawthorne effect," but they are mere tinkerings with a symptom due to our inability or unwillingness to face the issue. Let us "innovate" and "reform" undergraduate education with deliberate vigor, but let us not forget that the real purpose of undergraduate education, the long-range influence on the lives of our students, will probably not necessarily be improved by our innovative programs but by the dialogue that some of our teachers will establish with our students.

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